

# Book Review: Embodied inquiry. Writing, living and being through the body

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## Book review

*Embodied Inquiry: Writing, Living and Being Through the Body*, Celeste Snowber (2016),

Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, xxx pp., ISBN: 9789463007535, p/bk, ISBN: 9789463007542, h/bk,

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*Embodied Inquiry* is no ordinary publication. Commenting on language, structure and the flow of the argument would therefore be worlds away from the book's magic to awaken a personal and experiential journey. It was joyous as well as uncanny to read a text that so accurately voices my own life experiences and movement explorations – in many ways it was like reading my own diary. These things considered, you will understand that this cannot be an ordinary review!

There is a different rhythm to this book. Like poetry, I could not read it all at once. The rhythm made me pause, feel, move, meander, put away and return when I had worked with the material. I could taste and digest the textured language before I wetted my appetite for a new course. I read it on different levels, and from different places. My body felt 'seen' and 'acknowledged' and relaxed through the invitations to slow down, savour and undertake 'horizontal inquiries' (18). As a woman I reconnected with my womb as a studio of life (42), and encouraged to see change as a sacred space (68) – an antidote to our cultural fear of ageing. As a scholar I was deeply grateful for another's voice that speaks about truly integrating our bodies, hearts, minds and souls into our academic art and recognizes that this art is less for its separation or denial of these precious elements.

Celeste Snowber calls for an emancipation of the body, making a strong case for embodied methodologies and physical and emotional literacy within the academic enterprise as well as in our culture in general. This call is not at the expense of cognition or spirituality, but rather reads as a radically inclusive treat(y) that embraces all modalities. She argues that embodied enquiry as a way of being ‘enriches all the methodologies of research and practices’ (xv). We are invited to see our ‘bodies as a place where you can search and research what you deeply know within you. The body is a site of inquiry, a place that is on the threshold of possibility’ (68). Listening to the...

data of the body

spiritsongs of the cells (...)

break into humility and embrace beyond

what is known. (62)

... is a skill that serves us well in daily life as well as in our research, which do not need to be separate. This is especially important in a time where physical appearance rules over intuitive understanding and expression in most cases.

The book starts with a moving love letter written by the body, which holds the key to access and kindle our imagination, intuition and perception, and which dearly loves to be taken out to nature and return to the wilds. Further chapters cover topics such as solitude and silence; the domain of the sensuous and sensuality; writing from the body; listening and the senses; paradoxes, landscape and ecology. Threads that are woven throughout the text include restoration, creativity, gratitude, love, life force, breath, presence, flow and receptivity.

Snowber offers an intimate reflection of all aspects that make us human, processed into a true art of living. She playfully challenges many of the deeply ingrained concepts in our language and culture. The writing is abundant with alliterations, wordplay and poetic imagery: ‘bullied the body’, ‘grammar of the gut’, ‘domecstasy’, ‘lifelines’ (instead of deadlines), ‘surthrival’, ‘inhear’ (instead of insight), evadance and ‘steeped in the tea of solitude’. Like our bodies, the text is not always flawless, but reads as a bold invitation to open a door or climb through a window into another way of being. What we *thought* we knew is turned upside down and back to front. It invites a different approach to life based on connecting with our essence.

Each chapter ends with a ‘bodypsalm’, a format that Snowber developed as ‘a way to remind and rebody myself back to what matters’ (Snowber 2012). The inclusion of those treasures in academic writing is a courageous feat. The bodypsalms are personal as well as universal, metaphoric as well as concrete. Their poetry often touches a chord that animates a memory, a knowing that reminds me of the esoteric wisdom of many mystery traditions:

it is not only the earth  
which needs greening  
but your own precious soul. (14)

In my own practice I notice how the experiences that find their way into creative writing stay with me, as if they ingrain themselves in my cells and bones on a deep level. They become lived-through seeds of knowing, which I can reconnect to when rereading the words.

Snowber describes plenty of exercises for walking, writing, getting unstuck, ‘tak[ing] notes with your feet’ (11), slowing down to rekindle inspiration and revitalize; reconnecting with meaning; inhibiting time consciously rather than letting it rush past us leaving us reeling, prioritizing. The

invitation is to let our bodies be(come) our teacher, and ‘listen’ in a different way, opening to the ‘rivers of insight which may want to come into our lives’ (60). This can be encouraged by cultivating ‘a state of openness, a place of fertility’ while we get out of the way and let ‘the great mystery to unfold through our beings’ (60). Although Snowber underlines that ‘there are no[t] rational explanations for when or why deep insight comes’ (61), it sure tickles my curiosity as to where guidance, understanding and even epiphanies may come from. I agree that much wisdom resides *within* the body, but in addition I think that the body as antenna is able to tune into a vast network of information, or quantum field, apparently ‘outside’ of us (I’m still working on the *how*).

However it works, the body is clearly one of the fertile starting points for this journey (as well as the place where the insights are anchored, Kieft 2017). Culturally and academically, we have an intriguing relationship with our bodies. More and more we recognize the body as a source of information and ‘epistemological site of knowing’ (Nabhan-Warren 2011: 384). However, ‘new’ methodologies such as ‘embodied research’ or ‘practice as research’ are often still presented cleanly and elegantly. I rather like Snowber’s sense of ‘holy irreverence’ (86) as she unpacks the messiness, limits, paradoxes, edginess, changeability, impoliteness and vulnerabilities of the body. This seems a very good analogy for research practice in general – at least mine is never as neatly packaged as the theory books had me believe (yes, after seventeen years of practice I finally dare confess!). Rather than this being the death knell for research, Snowber explains how these apparent limitations of longing and fragility can serve as thresholds: ‘Here the syllables of our lives make up the fabric of our bodysouls. Our ability to feel each nuance can bring subtleties of awareness to what is yearning within us’ (68):

even agitation is a comma

each heartbeat is the rhythm

yearning to articulate

through the muscles of your fingers. (52)

Tuning into the body's vulnerability is not a weakness, as we so often believe in our culture.

Neither is it predictable, considerate or polite. It therefore requires a certain disregard for rules and norms 'in favour of listening to the rumblings and rhizomes of the body's way' (86). It turns things we take for granted upside down, and requires a de- or re-conditioning into more natural rhythms.

Rhythms that do not fit in our meticulously measured operation of time with a linear upward emphasis, but rhythms that can be circular, backward or downward, and understand the natural law of ebb and flow, of activity and rest; rhythms that pause for a long while before the next movement, perhaps so long that they seem to have stopped altogether.

During my education I for sure have never learned to 'cooperate with my own nature' (20) and find that place deep in my body where everything is sacred (22). Snowber's invitation to not only investigate what I say 'no' to (which is difficult enough to do anyway), but also what I say 'yes' to (86), was a real eye opener. I have lived with chronic pain for twenty years. Only recently I am starting to understand more about it. Do I hate my body for it? No. On the contrary – I want to take care of it as best as I can, as a loved one I want to keep from harm as much as possible. Although many choices come back again and again to putting bread on the table, I ask myself 'where am I keeping myself from showing up' (87), and how can I give myself permission to and create situations in which I can thrive (57)?

welcome back to the familiar

the land of the perplexed

where paradox reigns. (72)

Beware – this book may change your life. If you do not like delving into the territory of the unknown, I advise you to steer well clear from it. But if you dare, let it be a masterful guide for deeply increased intimacy with your beautiful body – the only thingamajig that is sure to wake up with you every day of your life, and be with you until the day you die. Better make friends with it and celebrate.

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